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SUBJECT: Getting Set to De-Mine Sri Lanka's North - Stepping
Gingerly

REF: COLOMBO 0621

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Charge and other U.S. Embassy officials met July 10 with Basil Rajapaksa, Special Advisor to the Sri Lankan president. Their discussion focused on de-mining in Sri Lanka's Northern Province - a prerequisite for the return of those displaced during the protracted conflict between the LTTE and the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL). The Charge confirmed that State/WRA had just executed four grants, totaling \$6 million, with Danish Demining Group (DDG), The Swiss Foundation for Mine action (FSD), Halo Trust, and Mine Advisory Group (MAG). Rajapaksa acknowledged the important role played by experienced international NGO (INGO) mine action agencies. Expressing concern about monitoring the INGO's performance (and pointing out that they have multiple funding sources), Rajapaksa asked for a summary of the expected outputs to be achieved with USG funding. He also invited the USG to propose where and how INGO assets would best support de-mining in the North. Rajapaksa then revealed that assessments were already underway in the North - being conducted by multi-disciplinary teams of sector experts and engineers - to determine the priority work to be undertaken in preparation for IDP returns. He concluded by saying that the GSL is now thinking ahead to creating returns packages for IDPs, once mines are cleared and minimum conditions for their returns are met. In a follow on meeting with Rajapaksa on July 14, Charge delivered a letter with additional details of the INGO programs. Rajapaksa has become very engaged with de-mining, and commended the USG for playing an important and constructive role, for example through mapping, in having the GSL focus on priority areas for de-mining. END SUMMARY

A Flurry of Activity Focused on De-Mining

12. (SBU) One month ago, the Charge first met with Rajapaksa (reftel) to discuss the GSL's criteria for de-mining the North. Since that meeting, there has been a flurry of activity focused on de-mining. Late in June, on a trip to India to discuss

reconstruction of the North, Rajapaksa negotiated the funding of four Indian de-mining teams (exmilitary) to participate in the

de-mining of Sri Lanka's North. During the trip, he also called Charnie, asking about USG funding of mine action INGOs and expressing concern about how their performance would be measured.

A Hint of Optimism

13. (SBU) With resources for de-mining available and mounting pressure on the GSL to live up to its promise to return 80 percent of the displaced population by the end of the year, Rajapaksa has convened several meetings over the past week of high level officials to discuss de-mining. On July 10, he met with representatives of the INGO and local NGO mine action agencies, UNDP, the Sri Lankan Army (SLA), and his own advisors from the Ministry of National Building and Estate Infrastructure Development.

14. (SBU) In a read-out afterwards by the INGOs, it was clear that Rajapaksa set a positive, constructive tone in the meeting. He recognized the de-mining expertise of INGOs and emphasized that their contributions will allow people to return home as quickly as possible. He informed that the National Mine Action Center would be moved to the same building as the Presidential Task Force for Resettlement of the North, which is also chaired by Rajapaksa. As part of this centralization process, he noted that future mine action task orders would be issued in Colombo, and that procedures would be streamlined to facilitate the work in the field (for example, in the issuance of security clearances for local de-miners, visas for expat staff, and approvals for the movement of de-mining equipment to various sites in the North). He also stated that future de-mining proposals must be submitted to the GSL for review and approval before submission to donors, expressing concern that INGOs - with their multiple funding sources - are not held adequately accountable for the work accomplished.

Reaching Agreement on USG Demining Grants

15. (SBU) Rajapaksa repeated a similar message to the Charge. Acknowledging that USG funding is being channeled to INGOs (and not to the SLA or the civilian de-mining unit of the GSL, as had been repeatedly requested of the U.S. and other donors), Rajapaksa said that the GSL wants a better accounting of the work to be undertaken by INGOs. He asked for information on what the USG is buying with its \$6 million contribution, specifically asking about increases in manpower and acquisition of new equipment. He also asked what could be accomplished with these resources, in terms of meeting the de-mining needs of the North. The Charge agreed to write a letter providing the requested information.

16. (SBU) Although the Charge underscored that the GSL should view these INGO grants as part of its de-mining arsenal, supporting the priorities identified by the GSL, Rajapaksa turned the issue 180 degrees, asking what the USG proposed undertaking with these resources. What followed was a discussion of geographic areas in the North, with Rajapaksa referring to several maps and pointing out priority areas in the Districts of Mannar (the Rice Bowl and Manthai West Division, and Madhu Church), Kilinochchi (Pachchilaipalli and Kandavalai Divisions, along A-9 Road to Kilinochchi Town), Mullaitivu (Manthai East and Tunukkai Divisions and along the A-32 Road from Mankulam to Mullaitivu Town).

An Innovative USAID Map

17. (SBU) Once Rajapaksa had pointed out areas of focus on his series of district-level maps, Charge spread out a 1:150,000 scale map of the North, developed by USAID's Geographic Information Systems Expert. Although the available minefield/UXO contamination data is incomplete (there is no LTTE minefield data available and the SLA minefield data post-2006 has not been made public), the map is nevertheless the first cartographic presentation of Rajapaksa's stated de-mining priorities overlaid with existing minefield data. This same map had been shared earlier with Rajapaksa's technical advisors. Sufficiently impressed, Rajapaksa asked that the USAID map be left with him. NOTE: the map has also sparked discussion within the GSL, with UNDP, among other donors (Japanese, British, Australians, ECHO), and among the mine action INGOs themselves.

GSL Demining and Resettlement Plans?

18. (SBU) Rajapaksa showed recent reports by GSL officials

(technical specialists and engineers) that described the damage to and rehabilitation needs of infrastructure in many population centers, until recently inaccessible to civilians. He said that Government teams had visited 30 of the 33 divisions in the Vanni and had written reports and taken photos. He went on to list the types of returns incentives being contemplated by the GSL, including: a 25,000 Rupees (\$210) grant per family (according to Rajapaksa, the first round of returnees will receive this grant from UNHCR funding), tin sheets for house reconstruction, six months' food rations (to which USAID food aid will make an important contribution), and various incentives (seeds, subsidized fertilizer, tools) for re-starting agricultural production. He did admit, however, that "we don't yet have funding for all these inputs."

Follow-on Meeting

19. (SBU) On July 14, the Charge and USAID Director participated in a ceremony chaired by Rajapaksa to acknowledge the contribution by the USG of emergency Title II food aid to the displaced people of the North. In his remarks of appreciation, Rajapaksa noted the support being provided by the USG to the GSL for returning people "to their homes of origin." He particularly underscored the USG contribution to de-mining, mentioning that "we may travel two different roads, but we are all headed to the same destination" - a reference to and recognition of our funding INGO mine action agencies, whereas the GSL has sought donor support for its SLA and civilian Humanitarian De-Mining Unit de-miners. Rajapaksa went on

to publicly recognize that the USAID-produced de-mining map has helped the GSL focus its de-mining priorities, and requested that USAID provide one map to each of the five Government Agents (from the five districts) of the North, who were meeting later that day to discuss reconstruction and resettlement.

Letter Delivered

10. (SBU) After the food aid ceremony, the Charge handed Rajapaksa the letter requested in the July 10 meeting. He pointed out that the letter and attachments were a summary of many of the de-mining assets in-country (personnel and equipment), as well as providing information on what personnel and major equipment was being funded by the State/WRA funding. Also in response to Rajapaksa's request, the Charge's letter gives illustrative scenarios to the GSL as to where and how these four mine action INGOs can be deployed. Rajapaksa noted that he would accompany a JICA delegation to the North on July 15 to look at reconstruction possibilities, he stated that he would like to take a USG delegation in the near future.

11. (SBU) COMMENT: We are encouraged by the positive and constructive tone being conveyed in these de-mining meetings with senior GSL officials. We feel that momentum is building, in part because of groundwork by USG officials with the mine action INGOs, UNDP, and GSL officials. We will continue to look for ways to engage the GSL, emphasizing our supportive role, while working behind the scenes with other donors and the technical experts from the INGO mine action agencies. It is becoming increasingly apparent that the GSL is sincere about having people return home as soon as minimum conditions - including de-mining - are met. Whereas too much time over the past months has been wasted by the GSL in trying to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of de-mining by INGOs, compared to the SLA, the mood seems to be shifting toward acknowledgement that a) USG and most other donor funding will only be channeled through the INGOs, and b) these organizations have an important role in making the North safe for IDP returns. Nevertheless, the inherent distrust of INGOs continues to be a factor, demonstrated by Rajapaksa's insistence that future de-mining proposals be vetted by the GSL, and that INGOs be held accountable for their funding and their results. Although more sanguine than Rajapaksa about the capacity and accountability of mine action INGOs, particularly those selected by the USG for funding, we too will focus on performance.

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